

Pāli Tipiṭaka Translation into Khmer: A Watershed of Achievements in the History of Cambodian Buddhism

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Historical Background of Buddhism and Pāli Tipiṭaka in Cambodia

Buddhism in present Cambodia is Theravāda which is followed by approximately 95 percents of the total 15 million population. In her history, Cambodia used to follow other Buddhist schools such as Sarvastivāda, Mūlasārvastivāda, Sammitīya and Ariyasammitīya in Nokor Phnom or Funan Period (1st century - 550 AC) and Chenla Period (550 - 802); Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna in Angkor Period (802-1431). But in her early history up to the reign of King Jayavarman VII the Great (1180 - 1218), who himself was a follower of Mahāyāna, and who installed Buddhism as the State religion, Brahmanism was largely the predominant religious belief in the country. The current Theravāda Buddhism became widespread and took firm root in the country in the late 13th century and rapidly was adopted by the vast majority of the population.

Cambodian *Theravāda* Buddhism may have come from and have been influenced by three sources, namely, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Mon. Being a neighbor of Cambodia, Thailand has naturally had influence on Cambodia, especially from the early fifteenth century in which Thailand captured several parts of Cambodia, and also invaded the capital of Angkor¹. There are evidently striking similarities between Thai Buddhism and Cambodian one.

Sri Lanka has been called "Stronghold of Theravāda" Buddhism for the reason that Theravāda has been safeguarded and has been in flourishing condition in the country since it was first introduced there in the third century BCE during the reign king Devānampiya Tissa (247-

¹ Thai invaded Angkor for the second time in 1395 (for five months), captured hundreds of learned scholars and took religious scriptures and valuables to Thailand. After the glorious reign of Jayavarman VII the Great, Angkor was on the declining spiral and finally was abandoned in 1432.

207 BCE)². Sri Lankan monks also helped spread the Theravāda Buddhism to Cambodia after Buddhism was purified and reunified during the reign of King Parākramabāhu the Great (1153-1186). An undated inscription which contains several Pāli words has been found at Kompong Svay in Northeastern Cambodia. According to Gorge Coedès, it belongs to the fifteenth century³. It refers to a monk named Laṅkā Śrīyasa who taught Dhamma to royal princes. He performed various meritorious activities to popularize the teaching of the Buddha. The king conferred a title on this great monk, *Swamī Sīlaviriyādhika Buddhasambhāra ... Saṅghapari-cāra Mahāpurusha* (venerable monk, great man, servant of the Saṅgha, treasure of wisdom, endowed with virtues and effort). The word Laṅkā ...Śrīyasa may indicate that he was from Sri Lanka or may be related in some way to Sri Lanka. This learned monk played an important role in the religious history of Cambodia during this period.

Tāmalinda, a son of Jayavaraman VII, went to Sri Lanka and received ordination and education at *Mahāvihāra* monastery. After having studied Tripiṭaka in Sri Lanka for about ten years and earning the title "*Mahāthera*", he went to help establish and spread Sīhaḷa Buddhism in Pagan (Myanmar) with other four monks, namely, Chapaṭa of Talaing (Mon), Sīvali of Tāmalitthi (Tamluk, Bengal), Ānanda of Kañcipura or Conjeveram in South India, and Rāhula of Sri Lanka⁴. Unfortunately, we have no further factual evidences of his activities with regard to the spread of Theravāda Buddhism in Cambodia. But Pang Khat, a Cambodian well-known scholar, is of the opinion that "after having studied *Tripiṭaka* at *Mahāvihāra*, *Anurādhapura*, *Tāmalinda Mahāthera* returned to Cambodia and helped consolidate Theravāda Buddhism in Cambodia in the end of 12th century"⁵.

The *Jinakālamālī*, a religious chronicle of Chiang Mai, records that 1967 years after the Mahāparinirvāṇa of the Buddha, i.e. in 1423 AC, eight monks headed by Mahāñāṇasiddhi from Cambodia with twenty-five monks from Nabbisipura (Chiang Mai) in Northern Thailand went to Sri Lanka to receive upasampadā ordination at the hands of Sinhalese Mahātheras⁶. They were joined by six Mon monks from Rāmañña country. At this time, Sri Lanka was ruled by king

² Rāhula Walpola; *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*; Colombo, Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1994, pp. 50-51

³ *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, VII, pp. 37-39

⁴ Hazra, Kanai Lal, *History of Theravāda Buddhism in South-east Asia*, Second Edition, Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2002, p. 94.

⁵ Pang Khat; *Pravat Puthasāsanā Nov Protes Kampuchea* (History of Buddhism in Cambodia); p. 108

⁶ *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient (BEFEO)*, XXV, pp. 49-50

Parakrambāhu VI of Jayavardhanapura (Kotte). Having studied *Tripitaka* from the *Mahātheras* in Sri Lanka, they were granted ordination in the presence of a chapter of twenty Sinhalese *Mahātheras* 1968 years after the great passing away of the Buddha i.e. in 1424 ACE at Yapāpaṭṭana in *Kalyāṇī* region. Vanarata Mahāsāmī was the Preceptor (*upajjhāya*) and Dhammācāriya acted as the Assistant Preceptor (*kammavācācāriya*). Although no Sri Lankan or Cambodian source makes any reference to this event, the account of *Jinakālamāli* should be considered as reliable⁷. The book, however, does not provide any information pertaining to the activities of Cambodian monks after their arrival in homeland. Nevertheless, those Cambodian monks must have returned to Cambodia with the new knowledge and experience, and helped strengthen Theravāda Buddhism in the country.

An inscription of 1.77m in height and 0.50m in width written in 1305 ACE, discovered at Neun Preah Bo, in Prachinpurī province, Thailand, but was then a part of Cambodia, mentions that Theravāda Buddhism was brought there from Sri Lanka⁸. This inscription is a strong proof beyond any doubt that Sri Lanka was the main source of the spread of Theravāda Buddhism to Cambodia and other countries in the region.

A monastery which was built in the fifteenth century in the heart of Capital Phnom Penh goes by the name Lankākusumārām or popularly called Wat Lanka. According to its history, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Sri Lankan monks used to come to Cambodia and stayed at the monastery. Obviously, Sri Lankan monks had come to Cambodia to promote Theravāda, and this was a trend as there had been exchange of visits from time to time by monks of these two countries. As a matter of fact, this has been a practice throughout history of Buddhism since the time of the Buddha. From time to time, Cambodian monks went to learn Tripitaka and Pāli in Sri Lanka while Sri Lankan monks came to spread Buddhādhamma in Cambodia.

The Mon who had practiced Theravāda Buddhism since the fifth century, also spread it to Cambodia, while they were fleeing from the Burmese invasion. According to Robert C. Lester, it was the Mon who introduced the Khmer *Theravāda* Buddhism⁹. The Mon people were known as *Dvāravati*, and were established in Central and northeast Thailand (Muang Fa Daet) and in

⁷ Hazra, Kanai Lal, op. cit., p. 186.

⁸ Ly Sorry, *History of Pāli High School, Royal Library, and Tripitaka Commissions* (in Khmer), Phnom Penh, Meng Hao Printing House, 2008, p. 17

⁹ Robert C. Lester, *Theravāda Buddhism in South East Asia*, Ann Harbor, University of Michigan, 1972, p. 75.

Chang Mai. The Mon Dvāravati had embraced Theravāda Buddhism from the earliest times. Many inscriptions from this early stratum of Theravāda Buddhism have been recovered from the ruins of the towns. Buddhas seated in the European style, known as Palai Buddhas, have been found throughout the Dvāravati areas. Also Sīmā stones and clay votive tablets bearing images of Buddha and inscribed in Pāli and Mon script have been found widely distributed throughout the Angkor Empire, in present day Thailand, Laos, southern Vietnam.

Pāli Tipiṭaka was mainly introduced from Sri Lanka to the country by Cambodian monks who had gone to study Buddhism and Pāli there, and brought back with them when they at the completion of studies returned to their homeland. Sri Lankan monks may have also played an important role in bringing Pāli Tipiṭaka texts to Cambodia when they as stated above visited the land, particularly after the reunification of the Buddhist Saṅgha in 1165 headed by Kassapa Mahāthera under the patronage of King Parākramabāhu the Great (1153-1186). Furthermore, some Pāli Tipiṭaka texts were also brought from Thailand by Cambodian monks who had gone to study there, particularly at Nabbisipura (Chiang Mai), when it was the Capital of Lan Na Kingdom (1296-1775), from the 15th century up to the French colonization of Cambodia (1863-1953). During the colonial period, the French administration dissuaded Cambodian monks from travelling to study in Thailand.

Pāli Tipiṭaka texts were copied and transcribed into Khmer on palm-leaves. the stylists and preservers used some elements like lacquer and coal power in order to preserve the texts for long period of time. Most of the texts did not contain names of copiers or transcribers as it was the practice of the day.

Khmer Tripiṭaka Commission

On 14th December 1929, King Sisowath signed a Royal ordinance for the setting up of the *Tipiṭaka* Commission for translating and editing the Pāli texts in Khmer.¹⁰ Based on the Royal Ordinance, eminent Khmer scholars both monks and laymen (mostly former monks) were appointed to the Tripiṭaka Commission, which initially consisted of 37 members including a

¹⁰ The members of this Commission, in the early stages, included such luminaries as Prince Norodom Suthāros, Samdech Preah Sanghareach [Saṅgharāja] Chuon-Nath, of the *Mahānikāya* (fraternity) and Samdech Preah Pothiveangs (Rector of the Buddhist University and later President of the *Tipiṭaka* Commission).

President, two deputies and 34 members of which 11 were laymen¹¹. The idea of translating the Pāli Tipiṭaka into Khmer was initiated by:

1. Mr. Fernant Laric, Résident Supérieur of French colonial administration in Cambodia,
2. Samdech Chaovea Veang Voraveangchey Chuon, Minister of Royal Palace, Royal Warehouse and Architecture, who drafted the royal decree,
3. Samdech Chakrei Koñchareathipatei Pon, Minister of Propaganda, Military and Education,
4. HRH Krom Luang Sisowath Sophanuvong, Minister of Interiors and Religious Affairs,
5. Oknha Yomareach Chea, Minister of Justice,
6. HRH Krom Khun Visuddhikhattiyavong Norodom Suramrith, Minister of Navigation, Agriculture, Handicrafts and Commerce,
7. Oknha Issarathipatei Pen,
8. HRH Samdech Krom Preah Vorachak Ranariddh Norodom Sothearos, Chair of Royal Family Assistance Council,
9. Miss Suzane Karpêlès, Secretary General of Royal Library.¹²

The Khmer Tripiṭaka Commission consists of following members:

Name	Position	Remarks
1. Ven. Preah Sirisammativong Lvi Em	President	Director of PHS ¹³
2. Ven. Preah Udommuni Oum Sou	Vice President	
3. Ven. Preah Mahābrahmamuni Tep Ou	Vice President	Deputy Director of PHS
4. Ven. Preah Sāsanasobhapa Chuon Nath	Member	Deputy Director of PHS
5. Ven. Preah Visuddhivong Huot Taht	Member	Teacher of PHS
6. Ven. Preah Palat Saṅghavijjā Mocung	Member	
7. Ven. Preah Mahā Som Chhun	Member	
8. Ven. Preah Mahā Som Loch	Member	
9. Ven. Preah Mahā Meung Ses	Member	
10. Ven. Preah Kru Ñāṇasamvara Ngean Chhin	Member	
11. Ven. Preah Āchār Chap Pin	Member	

¹¹ Huot Tath, *The Birth of Khmer Tripiṭaka* (in Khmer), Reprint, Phnom Penh, Buddhist Institute, 1995, pp. 3-5.

¹² Huot Tath, *The Birth of Khmer Tripiṭaka* (in Khmer), Reprint, Phnom Penh, Buddhist Institute, 1995, pp. 3-5.

¹³ PHS = Pāli High School

12. Ven. Preah Āchār Tin Huot	Member	
13. Ven. Preah Āchār Pen Sok	Member	Teacher of PHS
14. Ven. Preah Āchār Hem Chieu	Member	Teacher of PHS
15. Ven. Preah Āchār Chhim Sum	Member	
16. Ven. Preah Āchār Koam Dum	Member	
17. Ven. Preah Āchār So Hay	Member	
18. Ven. Preah Āchār You Oun	Member	
19. Ven. Preah Āchār Ouk Chea	Member	
20. Ven. Preah Āchār Uy Pang	Member	
21. Ven. Preah Kru Munisumedhā Long Chea	Member	
22. Ven. Preah Pālat Ket Toa Thitasilo	Member	
23. Ven. Preah Āchār Mang Neang	Member	
24. Ven. Preah Āchār Mae Pann	Member	
25. Ven. Preah Āchār Aen Poang	Member	
26. Ven. Preah Pālat Hem Nheum	Member	
27. Neak Mahā Nhok Them ¹⁴	Member	Layperson
28. Neak Āchār Hong Chhea	Member	Layperson
29. Neak Āchār Nget Him	Member	Layperson
30. Neak Āchār Bou Bo	Member	Layperson
31. Neak Mahā You	Member	Layperson
32. Neak Āchār Ouk Sen	Member	Layperson
33. Neak Āchār Hy Heng	Member	Layperson
34. Neak Āchār Kim An	Member	Layperson
35. Neak Āchār Nuon Duong	Member	Layperson
36. Neak Āchār Sek Chhun	Member	Layperson
37. Neak Āchār Uch Ros	Member	Lay teacher of PHS.

In 1940, the Tripitaka Commission was re-organized and leadership was adjusted. Consequently Ven. Huot Tath was promoted to the post of Vice President of the Commission following the death of Ven. Oum Sou, while the number of members had been increased to 43.

¹⁴ Neak Āchār refers to a layperson who was a former monk-teacher of Pāli school or learned ex-monk. He may continue to teach or may.

In the 1940 list, 21 new members were added to the Commission as replacements for some original members whereas some were newly appointed.¹⁵ The newly added members were:

Name	Position	Remarks
1. Ven. Viriyapaṇḍito Pang Khat	Member	Professor of SBU ¹⁶
2. Ven. Preah Botumvongsā	Member	
3. Preah Achār Kem Toa	Member	Pāli Professor of SBU
4. Ven. Preah Mahā Chay Kim San	Member	
5. Ven. Preah Mahā Chhim Nong	Member	
6. Ven. Preah Mahā Uk In	Member	
7. Ven. Preah Mahā Meas Sovann	Member	
8. Ven. Preah Indamuni Sek Neang	Member	Pāli Professor of SBU
9. Mr. Chhim Nak	Member	
10. Mr. Meak Sun	Member	
11. Mr. Im Tan	Member	
12. Mr. Kuy Soth	Member	
13. Mr. Meas Yuth	Member	
14. Mr. Ky Kim Siv	Member	
15. Mr. Uk San	Member	
16. Mr. Prak Chhuok	Member	
17. Mr. Sieng Din	Member	
18. Mr. Chit Bin	Member	
19. Mr. Yann Un aka On Uy	Member	
20. Mr. Um Koy	Member	
21. Mr. Prouch Top	Member	

As most of the original members and members added in 1940 had passed away in succession, and few may have quitted, by 1969 there were only 13 in toto including a President and a Vice President as below:

¹⁵ Huot Tath, op. cit., pp. 5-7.

¹⁶ SBU = Preah Sihanoukraj Buddhist University. Ven. Pang Khat was a Sanskrit Professor who was a prolific writer, his works includes the Khmer translation of Hitopadeśa, which has been very popular among public.

Name	Position	Remarks
1. Samdech Preah Bodhivang Huot Tath	President	Rector of SBU
2. Ven. Preah Munikosala So Hay	Vice President	
3. Ven. Preah Putheachār Hy Chea	Member	
4. Ven. Preah Sāsanamuni Kem Toa	Member	Pāli Professor of SBU
5. Ven. Preah Visuddhivong Mao Khan	Member	
6. Ven. Preah Sirisammativong Thon Him	Member	
7. Ven. Preah Gneanavong Oum Sum	Member	
8. Ven. Preah Thommavarodom Chea Sok	Member	
9. Ven. Nāṇasamvarivara Heng Leang Hor	Member	
10. Ven. Preah Mahā Pen Seng An	Member	
11. Ven. Preah Mahā Vann Chin	Member	
12. Ven. Preah Mahā Pok Son	Member	
13. Mr. Phal Tith	Member	

All members of Tripiṭaka Commission including the original members and the added members over the times had been either teachers/Professors or were the graduates of the monastic educational institutions. They embarked on this stupendous *magnum opus* which comprised 110 volumes. Each volume ranges from 400 to 900 pages. Entitled *Preah Trey Beydak*, this bilingual corpus comprises: (i) 13 volumes of the *Preah Viney Beydak (Vinaya Piṭaka)*, (ii) 64 volumes of the *Sottan Tak Beydak (Sutta Piṭaka)*, and (iii) 33 volumes of the *Apāphithommak Beydak (Abhidhamma Piṭaka)*. The completion of this great literary undertaking was celebrated on 1st and 2nd April 1969 in the capital on a grand scale.

Pāli Tipiṭaka Translation into Khmer

In translating the Pāli Tipiṭaka into Khmer, the members of the Commission had decided to compare the editions of the *Tipiṭaka* published in Ceylon, Burma and England. The variants were noted in the footnotes as follows: 'M' for Burmese (Maramma), 'Si' for Sinhalese and 'O' for the Pali Text Society's edition.¹⁷ To maintain the accuracy of their sources, the members of

¹⁷ The Pāli Text Society was founded in London in 1881 by Prof. T.W. Rhys Davids for the express purpose of promoting and fostering the study of Pāli, primarily by means of editing and publishing the texts in Roman scripts and then translating them into English.

the Commission used the *Aṭṭhakathās*, *Ṭīkas* and *Yojanās* (commentaries, sub-commentaries and grammatical construction exegeses respectively) in translating the *Tipiṭaka* into Khmer. The translation was not, however, made in the colloquial language but, in order to preserve the original meaning in Pāli, it was rendered in a literary style.

The translation commissions were divided into six groups, who were assigned six different jobs below:

1. Group for copying Pāli from old texts,
2. Group for editing Pāli,
3. Group for translating from Pāli into Khmer,
4. Group for Khmer proof-reading
5. Group for Khmer final proof reading,
6. Group for final editing and publishing.¹⁸

The Commission made arrangements to print Pāli on one page and Khmer on the opposite page. Therefore, the Cambodian Tripiṭaka contains both Pāli and Khmer translation in the same volume. Sets of this edition were sent to Burma, Ceylon, China, India, Japan, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, England, France, Germany and the United States on the basis of donations, exchange or subscriptions.

The translation of Pāli Tripiṭaka into Khmer was expected to provide various benefits to Cambodian people such as:

1. Easy to read and understand as the translators have already considered and arranged the wording,
2. Making Buddhism from the time of the Buddha up to present more accessible and less mysterious,
3. If Buddhist followers wish to study and practice morality, concentration and wisdom, they are able to find them all in this Tripiṭaka.
4. Making the Buddhavacana more visible to the people as the Buddha had already delivered it.

¹⁸ Sin Sovanny, *Tripiṭaka Commission of Cambodia* (in Khmer), Phnom Penh, Editions Angkor, 2012, pp. 22-23.

5. Possessing the Tipiṭaka on one side in Pāli and another side in Khmer is like having two lamps or lanterns set up on both sides of a path toward tranquility, which the unfortunate are unable to walk along.

6. Cambodia is a highly fortunate country to possess a set of Tipiṭaka which is of two languages as it contains one side in Pāli and another side in Khmer. It is just comparable to having two bottles of medicine which can appease several diseases such as anxiety, controversies and doubts, which have arisen for a long time.¹⁹

The Khmer Tipiṭaka Commission, like other institutions in the country, was abolished after Khmer Rouge came into power on April 17, 1975, and all the commission members, except two, namely, Oum Sum and Heng Leang Hor, were killed. Since its abolition, the *Tripiṭaka Commission* has so far never been revived whereas other Buddhist institutions have mostly been brought back to life. There may be four principal reasons for it:

1. Under the Khmer Rouge rule, this Commission has received the most impact compared to other Buddhist institutions as the regime were targeting the educated monks for killing especially the members of this very prestigious Commission. There have been not many scholars of Pāli and Buddhism survived.

2. No strong commitments of regimes after the Khmer Rouge to re-establish it.

3. After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, there were no facilities with which the *Tripiṭaka Commission* may be revived.

4. There seems to have been no urgent need to re-establish the *Tripiṭaka Commission* as the canonical *Tripiṭaka* texts have already been translated though *Aṭṭhakathā*, *Ṭīkā*, *Yojanā* and other Pāli compendiums of Buddhism have not been translated yet. Over the years in the past few decades, some individuals have translated some *Aṭṭhakathā* such as *Samantapāsādikā* (commentary of *Vinaya Piṭaka*), *Aṭṭhasālinī* (commentary of *Dhammasaṅgani*)²⁰, and so on. But the translation has never been officially accepted and authorized for study at formal Pāli schools.

¹⁹ Huot Tath, op. cit, pp. 13-14.

²⁰ First text of *Abhidhamma* which consists of seven books.

Conclusion

As the container of the Buddha's teachings, Tripitaka is a quintessential component of Buddhism. From the time the Pāli Tripitaka had been translated into Khmer and the entire sets were published in 1969, Cambodia has proudly enjoyed the possession of the whole Pāli-Khmer *Tripitaka*. By this time, some other Buddhist-majority countries had not been able to complete the translation of the whole Tripitaka into their own language yet. Therefore, the completion of the Pāli Tripitaka into is undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of Buddhist scholasticism in Cambodia.

Ever since the translation had been done, Cambodian Buddhists have made use of the Pāli-Khmer Tripitaka to study Buddhism extensively as they could understand the Buddhavacana in their own language. The Tripitaka has been an impetus to Cambodian scholars and general Buddhists alike to try to understand the Buddha's teachings more and more. In the meantime, they have always acknowledged the hardship and sacrifices their forefathers had made for the sake of their nation.

Though the Pāli Tripitaka translation into Khmer had been completed, most of the commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*), sub-commentaries (*Tīkā*), and other Pāli texts (*Yojanā*) still remain in Pāli. Had not the Tripitaka Commission been abolished, it would have continued the translation work and would have completed most of the Pāli texts by now. It is a tragedy for Cambodian Buddhism. As Khmer Tripitaka Commission was not re-established after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, not only the Pāli texts have not been translated but scholarly works in Pāli and Buddhism have not been written. It is fervently hoped that the Cambodian government will necessary steps to set up the Khmer Tripitaka Commission or a commission of similar nature again to translate the remaining Pāli texts into Khmer and to produce scholarly works in Cambodia in the near future.

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